

Soviets surpass U.S. in surface-air weaponry: lessons from Mideast war

Kissinger orders CIA study of Israel's A-weapons capability

By Benjamin Welles
Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Washington

U.S. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger has ordered the Central Intelligence Agency to update a study made three years ago of Israel's nuclear-weapons capability.

The threatened breakdown of the Arab-Israeli cease-fire, the fact that the Geneva conference is still more than a fortnight away, plus suspicious Soviet ship movements during the recent fighting, have led the administration now to take a fresh hard look at the situation.

Whether Israel has, or has not, developed its own nuclear arsenal is still a burning issue inside the intelligence community here. Certain highly placed officials believe it has — but their views are based primarily on deduction rather than on hard evidence.

It is not generally known, for instance, that modern electronic intelligence devices based on land can penetrate the steel hull of a ship and can detect the presence of fissionable nuclear materials — such as warheads for missiles — provided the ship is not too far away.

Signs of A-weapons detected

All Soviet ships carrying arms from Black Sea ports to Syria and Egypt during the recent Arab-Israeli war had to transit the Turkish-controlled Bosphorus. Soon after the U.S. "alert" of its forces on Oct. 25, NATO intelligence officers in Turkey (a NATO ally) detected signs that Soviet merchantmen bound for Egypt were carrying what appeared to be nuclear weapons.

Their reports followed — and did not provoke — the calling of the U.S. alert. That alert, according to responsible sources, was based primarily on the Soviet's own previous alerting of one of its airborne divisions in Hungary; plus Soviet party chief Leonid I. Brezhnev's

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Is SA-6 like longbow that made knights in armor obsolete?

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The main military lesson for the United States of the 18-day Arab-Israeli war is that Moscow has surpassed Washington in the development of antiaircraft and antitank missiles.

Thanks to the SA-6 missile, known by the code name Gainful, and antitank missiles called the Sagger and the RPG-7 (also new to the Israelis), the Egyptians and the Syrians came very close in the first week of the war to defeating Israel, in the considered opinion now of American military analysts.

The Arabs destroyed 115 Israeli aircraft, or about one-third of their front-line planes, and about 800 (half) of their front-line armored vehicles.

It is calculated here that it will cost at least \$100 million and take four years to produce an American antiaircraft missile as good or better than the SA-6.

The question now is whether the SA-6 and the Sagger are the modern equivalents of the longbow which made knights in armor obsolete.

Air Force successful

What saved the Israelis, apart from the massive U.S. resupply effort, analysts have concluded, was the success of the Israeli Air Force, in spite of high losses, in knocking out the missiles when the missile barrage began to fail and the Egyptian Air Force, which lay low during the first week, went up.

The Egyptian planes, along with the Syrian Air Force, were literally blasted out of the sky by the immensely superior Israeli F-4 Phantoms and A-4s.

In dogfights over Sinai the Israelis lost only 3 aircraft to the Egyptians' 200. Altogether the Arabs lost 425 aircraft and 40 helicopters.

The Defense Department now is engaged in intensive reexamination of U.S. antiaircraft-missile programs —

*Kissinger asks study of A-arms capability

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harsh warning to President Nixon to restrain Israel from crushing the trapped Egyptian Third Army — failing which, he indicated, the Soviet Union might fly in its own troops to do so.

The Soviet threat was forestalled. But coming on the heels of the threatening Soviet posture, reports of suspected nuclear weapons in Soviet merchantmen en route to Egypt further heightened tension in Washington.

Missile delivery expected

Since last August, U.S. intelligence experts had been expecting Soviet deliveries to Egypt of the SCUD ground-to-ground missiles with a range of approximately 160 miles — enough to hit Israeli cities. The presence of the SCUDS in Egypt was finally confirmed in late October — just before the cease-fire — and was leaked by the Pentagon to the U.S. press on Nov. 1.

Insofar as is known here, the SCUDs have high-explosive warheads. The Soviet merchantmen with their suspected nuclear cargoes now have returned to Russia. But the Soviet move has left a deep impression here.

Moreover it has revived the Nixon administration's interest in knowing whether or not Israel has developed its own nuclear weapons and under what circumstances it might feel impelled to use them.

For three years, qualified sources say, proposals that the whole issue be studied from top to bottom and that an updated report be made to the White House have been turned down on political grounds.

Richard Helms, the veteran CIA director whom President Nixon fired and transferred as his Am-

bassador to Iran last winter, is said to have told associates repeatedly that such a study would be "politically unwise — it would be unwelcome" at the White House.

From this Mr. Helms's former associates deduced that such a study might leak out, precipitating Arab pressures on Moscow for nuclear weapons and further straining the newborn U.S.-U.S.S.R. "detente."

Now, however, the issue is once again relevant. Some highly placed intelligence men are virtually certain that Israel has, in fact, nuclear weapons of its own.

Installations not discussed

Given Israel's scientific-industrial development, they say, there is no reason why Israel could not construct nuclear weapons. Moreover, given Israel's "Masada" complex of being surrounded by implacable enemies, there is no reason why it would not do so.

Sen. Stuart Symington (D) of Missouri, a former Secretary of the Air Force and a leading Senate military expert, has, for instance, reported seeing in Israel on visits there heavily guarded installations that his Israeli hosts would not discuss and which, in his opinion, almost certainly are nuclear-weapons plants.

Yet, while the U.S. and Israeli intelligence services often work together against Soviet and other mutual intelligence "targets," there are still some secrets which each keeps from the other. Israel's nuclear capability is one of them — now of increasing interest to the U.S. as the crucial Geneva conference draws near.

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in particular the SAM-D, which is between research and development — and is launching an effort that will cost hundreds of millions of dollars to upgrade Air Force and Navy electronic countermeasures.

In the field of antitank warfare the U.S. military expresses great confidence in a wire-guided antitank missile which, like the Sagger, throws a shaped explosive charge called "heat" against the side of the opposing tank.

But the Israelis did not have these weapons in their arsenal until the closing days of the war. It is a matter of argument in Washington whether this was due to reluctance by Washington to let the Israelis have them or the fact that the Israelis did not want them because they were overconfident about the ability of their aircraft to control enemy tank movements.

Then as now, they argue, circumstances, terrain, and tactical employment of the weapons can be decisive.

The SA-6 Gainful is described as a mach 2.8 integral rocket ramjet missile, 6 inches wide and 19 feet long, mounted in batteries of three on a truck. Its range extends from treetop to 50,000 feet.

The effectiveness of this weapon, which accounted for most of the Israeli losses, was that it was interlaced with the SA-2 high-altitude and SA-3 low-altitude missiles, the SA-7 very-low-altitude missile, and the ZSU-23 radar-directed machine gun.

In the outpouring of defensive ordnance the SA-6 stood out because of its two radar systems which the United States has not yet been able to counter.

The SA-6 that the Israelis captured was minus its electronic system, so that American experts have been able to study — and admire — only its aerodynamic and other qualities, and in particular its potential.

Nor have American technicians as yet found an answer to the radar-direction system of the 23-millimeter Soviet antiaircraft machine gun.

They have likewise found only partial protection against the heat-seeking qualities of the SA-7, known also as the Strela. It was known in Vietnam as a hand-held antiaircraft missile for use by isolated infantry against strafing attack. In Sinai and the Golan Heights the Arabs mounted it on trucks in banks of as many as 12, which could be fired in volleys of four.